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ABSTRACT

Critics of a dominant model of the person, which emphasizes autonomy and independence, have called for an alternative, more social, conceptualization of the self. To describe and validate social individuality as an alternative conceptualization of the self, 84 adults (54 females, 30 males), from a range of social classes and including persons participating in groups for social change, completed a survey. The survey included indices of cognitive-perceptual style, social apperception, and ideology, as well as questions about participants' backgrounds. An analysis of the results showed that the four measures interrelated in a way that supported social individuality. The measures were significantly correlated for women but not for men. Specifically, those women whose cognitive-perceptual style reflected a tendency to perceive integrated wholes (in contrast to simple wholes or small details) were also more likely to apperceive the social dimensions of human interactions, to express a collectivist ideology, and to describe the resolution of moral dilemmas using strategies that reflect themes of social responsibility. Women who participated in collectivist activities were more likely to perceive the self as social. Autonomous individualists, on the other hand, tended to stress the autonomy and independence of their range of activities. These findings support an alternative conceptualization of the self, and suggest that social individuality is more consistent for women than for men. (BL)

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Collective action and the development of social individuality in women

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The problem of the relationship of the individual and society is one of a small set of existential questions that confront all societies, and that some societies try to answer (Shweder & Bourne, 1982). Social psychologists, among others, have paid increasing attention to this recurring problem and to its "American" solutions (Buss, 1975, 1978; McGuire, 1973). Critics of a dominant model of the person that emphasizes autonomy and independence and assumes the "individual-as-central-sensibility" (Lewis, 1978) have called for an alternative, more social, conceptualization of the self (Buss, 1978; Youniss, 1978).

Some feminist theorists have set the stage for this alternative concept through their efforts more accurately to describe women's experiences. Chodorow (1978), for example, describes women as more relational and "empathetic" than men, suggesting that the differences are due to the fact that "women, universally, are largely responsible for early child care (p.43)." Similarly, Gilligan (1982) contrasts men's tendencies to base moral judgments on laws or abstract principles to women's conception of moral behavior as necessarily incorporating "an injunction to care (p.100)." Kaplan & Surrey (1984) have elaborated a theory of "the relational self" and explored the implications of the self-in-relation for women's development and for depression in women.

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Each of those theorists boldly challenges the centrality of the themes of autonomy and separation in the self-theories that dominate psychology today, alternatively emphasizing the importance of interrelation and connection as evidenced in their examination of women's "sense of self". Yet all three relational models posit separate individuals who then relate, remaining rooted in the model of the individual-as-central-sensibility. By more fully attending to the societal constraints and structured inequality (e.g., social status and power) in which women's relationships are embedded and to their responses to them, a true alternative self-theory, that is, one rooted in an assumption of the inherent sociality of the self, emerges.

The research described here is part of a larger study that described and empirically validated an alternative conceptualization of the self, labeled, social individuality, a "sense of self" that is rooted in social experiences. Evidence from cross-cultural research (e.g., Dumont, 1980; Schweder & Bourne, 1982; Tuan, 1982) and from Marxist theorists' discussion of the individual-society relationship (Schaff, 1970; Venable, 1945) suggested the parameters for this alternative, more social, understanding of the self. Social individuality refers to an understanding of the self as an ensemble of social relations, not a bundle of character traits possessed by a separate individual interacting with other autonomous individuals. Self-sufficiency and attachment, for example, are understood in the nexus of the individual and society, not as specific characteristics or attributes of an individual person. There is no individuality separate from sociality. Rather, individuality develops within, is defined by and defining of, the social.

Social individuality is an understanding of the self as social that can be identified as an assumption that some individuals hold and are in the process of actualizing through real social experiences. I hypothesized that this "alternative sense of self" could be measured at various levels of cognitive functioning and that these indices would be positively correlated, thus revealing a coherent construct, social individuality. In part because the dominant view of the self as autonomous individual is so pervasive, I argued that this alternative conceptualization would be most evident in individuals from less powerful groups whose social experiences are constrained by inequalities of power and status and who are working to change these conditions, for example, women involved in collective activities for social reform. The larger study of which the data described here are a part proposed to clarify empirically the meaning of this alternative understanding of the self through construct validational proceedures and through assessing the relationship of the construct to particular social experiences.

Method

Eighty-four white women and men from a range of social class backgrounds were purposively selected to include individuals participating in groups or organizations involved in collective activities for social change. Examples of these organizations include the Massachusetts Tenants Organization, labor unions and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN). Participants completed a written survey questionnaire including several psychological measures and questions about their background. Fifty-four females and 30 males ranging in age from 19 to 72 (with a mean age of 34.5) constituted the final sample. Thirty-four percent of this group indicated that they were not involved in any collective activities

whereas 40% were involved in at least one group and 26% were involved in at least one group and indicated that this group was of primary importance to them. Twenty-one percent of the sample worked in manual or service jobs whereas 40% were involved in minor professions and 39% in the major professions.

The study employed a broad range of indices, including measures of cognitive-perceptual style, social apperception, ideology and social responsibility, to identify the conceptualization of the self as social individuality at multiple levels of awareness. Taken together, these four cognitive processes or levels of human functioning provide a way of more fully grasping the way people view the self, whether as an autonomous individual or as a social individual. Interviews exploring childhood and current neighborhood, family and work experiences were also conducted with forty of the women in the sample to explore further relations between experiences in groups and one's understanding of the self. Time does not permit a full discussion of either the rationale for selecting each of these indices or the development of each coding system; but I note that each draws on a body of well-developed psychological literature and the instruments were elaborated from previously validated measures well known within psychometrics. Detailed descriptions of each of these measures and copies of the interview protocols are available from me.

Results

Initial correlational and factor analyses were statistically significant in the predicted directions, suggesting that the four measures interrelate in a way that reflects an orientation to the self which is described in this study by the term social individuality. Relationships among selected background variables, current life

experiences and the four individual measures and a composite score of social individuality were examined through regression analyses and generally confirmed the initial predictions. Detailed descriptions of these validational analyses are presented in my dissertation. The specific analyses that clarify women's understanding of self are of particular interest today.

Gender. In addition to gender differences in mean levels of social individuality, examination of the intercorrelation of the four measures of one's orientation to the self revealed differences in the patterns of relations among the various indices. In general, the measures are positively and significantly correlated for the sample of women whereas the relations are weaker and mostly nonsignificant for men (see Table 1). More specifically, those women whose cognitive-perceptual style reflected a tendency to perceive integrated wholes (in contrast to simple wholes or small details) were also more likely to apperceive the social dimensions of human interactions, to express a collectivist ideology and to describe the resolution of moral dilemmas using strategies that reflect themes of social responsibility. Of all the possible intercorrelations, only the relationship between social responsibility and ideology did not reach statistical significance in this correlation matrix.

In contrast, the pattern for men is not as consistent. Although the pattern of relationships between cognitive perceptual styles, social apperception and social responsibility are similar for the men, there were either no relationships between the ideology measure and the perceptual measures or there was a negative relationship (i.e., between ideology and social responsibility). Rather than revealing the relatively cohesive gestalt of relations identified for the sample of

women, this matrix reveals a more complex set of relations suggesting that (1) aspects of this underlying dimension may operate in different ways at different levels of awareness for women and men, or (2) that social individuality is a less pervasive orientation for men or (3) that social individuality exists at a different stage of development for women and men.

Group participation in collective activities. In addition to these differences between women and men there were significant differences among women. The combined score measuring social individuality was regressed on the six variables expected to predict an understanding of the self as social individuality. As expected (see Table 2) these six variables account for a significant amount of the variation in social individuality. The multiple R of .59 is statistically significant and indicates that these six predictors account for 35% of the variance in social individuality. The standardized beta coefficients from the last step of the equation, that is, controlling for all variables in the equation, indicate that participation in collective activites, higher levels of education and lower occupational levels are associated with higher scores on the index of social individuality.

A closer look at the role of group participation in collective activities indicates that 60% of those who participated in at least one group working for social change scored above the mean on the composite measure of social individuality whereas only 30% of those women who did not participate in any collective activities scored high in social individuality (i.e., above the mean). Hence women who participate in collectivist activities are more likely than women not engaged in such activities to perceive the self as social.

Additional evidence of how social experiences differ between women scoring high and low in social individuality are revealed in analyses of telephone interviews with this group. Interviews were content analyzed and examined to provide additional, more qualitative descriptions of this alternative orientation to the self. In general, findings from these post-hoc analyses suggest differences between those scoring high in social individuality, referred to as social individuals, and those scoring low in social individuality, referred to as autonomous individualists, particularly in the breadth and depth of their relationships and in their levels of community involvement. Social individuals are more likely than autonomous individualists to evidence both a widening circle of relationships from childhood to adulthood, including family, friends, neighborhood and community, and a tendency actively to participate in these communities, despite work and family responsibilities. For example, women in the group scoring high in social individuality tend to describe themselves in terms of relatedness to friends, family, neighborhood and society. Frequent acknowledgement of political and social differences with family or friends, suggests that interconnection does not negate particularity or difference. To listen to these interviews is to experience a strong sense of the quality of these interconnections while simultaneously experiencing the particularity of each woman. For example, one woman says: "When I go home to see my folks I find something I do in my life that they do in theirs, usually something in relationship to people, for example, in the way we both joke with people, ... It's important for me to see the links between who I am and them .... We've had some hard times. I ran away when I was in college. It was the Vietnam era. My folks are Republican. They've challenged me lots and I've challenged them. We

share things, like how we are relationally, but experiences I've had have really led me in different directions than them .... "

Social individuals are active and involved in circles well beyond immediate family or neighborhood and describe work as one vehicle for such involvement. They participate in a range of activities, many of which reflect both a sense of their own individuality or particularity and a commitment to social change through collaborative or collective action. Yet, they also cherish time alone and many of them mentioned the need for having time for themselves.

In contrast, autonomous individualists tend to describe their current communities in terms of physical characteristics and not in terms of human relations or interconnections. Independence and autonomy are themes that emerge in their descriptions of their personal and work lives. There is little evidence in these interviews of commitment to or engagement in action for social change.

Typical of this group is the woman who said that although most of her family of origin still lives in the area, family members "don't spend much time together". She added that she used to live in a 100-200 year old house near the ocean but now lives in an apartment. "I really like the shore. ... I have a whole set of values that I've established for myself and I'm not living that way [now]. I want to own my own house in a fairly well-to-do suburb .... At this point in my life I'm into materialism." This woman also stated that she values "flexibility and autonomy" in her current job and describes it as a place where she works "very independently". In addition to work-related professional groups in which she is active, she belongs to an exercise group that provides an "outlet for stress and tension. I am much more productive and more satisfied with myself physically and emotionally."

Autonomous individualists are also involved in a range of activities, but in contrast to social individuals they tend to stress the autonomy and independence of these activities rather than viewing them as contexts for relationship or as opportunities for making connections. Few autonomous individualists are actively involved in their communities and even fewer are engaged in collective activities for social change. Surprisingly, few of these women mention an interest in spending time alone.

Discussion

The findings from the larger study of which this research is a part strongly suggest that there is an alternative to the dominant conceptualization of the self, autonomous individualism. The data presented here today indicate that the multiple levels at which this orientation to the self have been measured intercorrelate more consistently for women than for men suggesting that one might expect to find a clearer articulation of this view of the self at this moment in history through examining women's lives. Although the small and non-representative sample prohibit generalization of the findings beyond the present data, the range of evidence from multiple psychological measures and from more qualitative descriptions of early childhood experiences and current life converge to reveal a consistent gestalt of a self understood as social individuality. This orientation to the self is revealed at multiple levels of cognitive awareness and related to particular social experiences. Individuals from less powerful groups who are actively engaged in efforts for social change are more likely to understand the self as social individuality. Current life and memories of early childhood experiences of social individuals provide further evidence of their greater sensitivity to social contexts and of their

tendency to be engaged actively in efforts for change. This data supports the argument that particularity or individuality is inextricably shaped by and shaping of sociality. The data further suggest an alternative to the models of women's sense of self that focus on interaction, for example, the descriptions of empathy and caring in women (Chodorow; Gilligan) or of the self-in-relation (Kaplan & Surrey). This alternative challenges a view of an autonomous individual in relation to other individuals and affirms an understanding of individuality and sociality as mutually constraining and constructing. In this dialectical relationship of self and society there can be no individuality without the social. In describing the understanding of the self as social individuality I have attempted to capture this understanding of the dynamic process of constructing and reconstructing the self and society.

Although women may be more likely than men to reveal a more consistent gestalt that is captured by the construct social individuality, the stronger differences revealed in this data emerge among the women themselves. This is most clearly revealed in the similarities and differences between the two groups as they described their social relations and collective activities. Further research is needed both to replicate these initial findings and to assess the discriminant validity of the construct in relation to more traditional cognitive measures, for example, field dependence and independence, and in relation to alternative personality measures of similar phenomena, for example, altruism or egoism.

TABLE 1

Intercorrelation Matrix by Gender Groups
Four Apertures on Social Individuality

Table 1-A: Women (Ns range from 50 to 54 due to missing data.)

	Cognitive-Perceptual Style	Social Apperception	Indiv-Coll Ideology	Social Responsibility
Cognitive-Perceptual Style		.29*	.36**	.28*
Social Apperception			.39**	.30*
Indiv-Coll Ideology				.14

Table 1-B: Men (N=30)

	Cognitive-Perceptual Style	Social Apperception	Indiv-Coll Ideology	Social Responsibility
Cognitive-Perceptual Style		.14	.07	.26 t
Social Apperception			.07	.37*
Indiv-Coll Ideology				-.10

t $p<.10$ *$p<.05$ **$p<.01$

TABLE 2

Selected Life Experiences and Social Individuality for Women

	Standardized Beta Coefficients		F (df) (at step entered)	
Predictors:				
Educational Level	.45**	(-)	12.07** (1,50)	(-)
Group Participation	.34*	(.34*)	9.50** (2,49)	(6.64*) (1,50)
Service & Manual Workers	.45 t	(.22)	7.04** (3,48)	(2.31 t) (5,46)
Group Participation by Workers	-.33	(-.33)	6.02** (4,47)	(2.75*) (4,47)
Group Participation by Minor Professionals	.11	(.15)	4.84** (5,46)	(3.27*) (3,48)
Minor Professionals	-.05	(-.29)	3.97** (6,45)	(4.23*) (2,49)
Multiple R:	.59**	(.44 t)		
r squared:	.35	(.20)		

Fs and Betas in parentheses represent scores in stepwise regression excluding educational level.

t $p<.10$ *$p<.05$ **$p.01$

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